

Dance Index

Ballet for the Troops on Leave

To the Editor of the Daily Telegraph

SIR—We have just been told by Mr. Churchill that we have a million and three quarter men in the field. He added many encouraging assurances as to the efficiency with which these men are being equipped and provisioned. So far so good. But men "in the field" are not always in the field. I wonder how many of those who cheered Mr. Churchill thought of asking him what provision has been made for their recreation when they are at home on leave.

During the last war, when we had 2,000,000 men in the field, we had 80,000 of them to entertain every night, with the result that theatre rents rose enormously. House full was the rule.

Unfortunately the quality of the entertainment did not rise: it fell to ridiculous depths. The pre-wireless soldier of 1914-18 was incredibly primitive in his tastes. No joke was too old for him (ask Mr. Robey) and no farcical comedy too stale provided there were four beds on the stage and the characters got often enough into the wrong ones.

The laughter of the Tommies and the squeals of the equally unaccustomed young women who took them to the theatre made a sort of noise that our actors had never heard before. The artistic level sank to such a point that "The Bing Boys" became relatively a classic. And in "The Bing Boys" Mr. Robey convulsed the house by calling his legs his understandings.

One night at the Coliseum I sat beside a soldier who did not know what a theatre was, and stared in utter bewilderment at the proceedings until we had a turn in which the performer imitated farmyard noises, whereupon my neighbour became ecstatic, and was buoyed up through the rest of the programme by the vain hope that the farmyard man would come again.

Yet this was an enormous improvement on the days when soldiers were supposed to be sufficiently provided for if there were plenty of places to get drunk in and plenty of prostitutes to get drunk with. Soldiers were not admitted and not served in decenter places. The Duke of Wellington avowedly won his battles with "common soldiers" assumed to be blackguards and drunkards. He was by no means always mistaken in that assumption.

The Kitchener volunteers and conscripts of the last war were decent lads, but nine out of ten of them had no artistic culture and had never heard a scientific lecture in their lives.

The wireless has changed all that. The B.E.F. comes this time from a world in which the concerts of the B.B.C. Symphony Orchestra, leader Paul Beard, conducted by Sir Adrian Boult (to say nothing of Toscanini), and lectures and sermons by eminent scientists and bishops are everyday incidents. Mean-

while the cinema has raised their standards of drama to such a point that I no longer count as a highbrow.

My present purpose is to call attention to the danger of this change being lost on our official and theatrical stick-in-the-muds, who have already shown the gravest signs of believing that now we are at war we must have "The Bing Boys" and the bedrooms with four beds and all the old sillinesses over again. They should all be shot instantly.

Let me give a howling example. One of the most astonishing artistic developments in the theatre of our time has been the rebirth of the high art of ballet at Sadler's Wells. We thought it had died with Diaghileff. That it could revive in its fullest excellence as an English institution in London, in an outlying theatre in a neighbourhood making no pretence to West End fashionableness, would have seemed 20 years ago the dream of a madman. Well, it has happened, and our British male dancers are as good as any in the world. Necessarily they are young; their 10 years' technical training has to begin when they are children, and they are superannuated from leading parts when they are 35. Consequently they are all of military age.

What I want to know is whether these irreplaceably rare and highly skilled artists, providing a most delectable entertainment of the highest class for our 50,000 soldiers on leave every night, are to be sent into the trenches to fill 30 places which could be better filled by 30 unskilled labourers.

If they were key men in any of the mechanical trades they would be exempted as a matter of course. Being artistic key men their importance may not be appreciated by our often Philistine authorities.

In the last war the composer of England's most famous serious modern opera, "The Immortal Hour," was treated as a vagabond and sent into the ranks, where they could do nothing with him but make him their bandmaster, while a young gentleman in another district was exempted with the greatest respect on his providing that he had once composed a waltz.

Now a dancer is in worse case than a composer, because he can compose melodies and form threes in a barrack square at the same time; but the dancer can keep himself up to the mark only by arduous daily practice. A year of soldiering would ruin him.

Besides, if the Sadler's Wells leading dancers go, bang goes the whole concern. Three hundred people of all grades are turned into the street, not to reinforce the Army, but to join the unemployed. There will be an end of our supremacy in one of the finest of the theatrical and musical arts. The theatre will become a military warehouse. And the soldier on leave will find nothing to recreate him after the miseries of the trenches except rubbish that the wireless has taught him to despise.

Faithfully,

G. BERNARD SHAW

London, S.W.1, Feb. 4, 1940

Dance in *LP*rose



APOLLON MUSAGETTE (Strawinsky-Balanchine). Above, Decor: Tchelitchev. Below, scene from ballet. Production 1942, Buenos Aires.

Dance Index

a new magazine devoted to dancing

Editors

BAIRD HASTINGS

LINCOLN KIRSTEIN

PAUL MAGRIEL

Foreword

In this seventh issue, *Dance Index* avails itself of ancient and honored tradition to take sabbatical leave of its customary practices and go in for a mid-summer spree, deliberately turning its back on precedent and policy. Heretofore each issue has been devoted to a monograph on some subject of historical or theoretical interest, eschewing all criticism of current performances or living artists, and confining itself, in accordance with this year's pre-arranged program, to matters concerning the dance in the Americas. You have only to turn the pages to see how these tenets have been violated.

In the first place, everybody here dealt with, except the pantomimi whom Lucian was so eloquently pleading for in the second century, is very much alive and most of them are treated critically. In the second place, of the six articles only two have any direct relation to the Americas. Lucian could scarcely even have conceived of the existence of these continents, though, indeed, his Crato is a type not altogether unknown hereabouts if we overlook his willingness to be converted. Mr. Mei, one of the supreme artists of the contemporary theatre, made one brief but unforgettable tour of this country back in 1930, which makes him no more than an isolated experience, however memorable, for a few of us. Mr. Shaw's British soldier-dancers, to be sure, are closely correlative to our own, and the Russian Ballet is still very much with us. Nevertheless, only Mr. Haggin's discussion of the musicianship of Balanchine, and W. H. Hudson's description of those important but little known South American dancers, Lapwing and Rupicola, actually conform to specifications.

In the third place, this is no monograph but a miscellany consisting of both new pieces and reprints by half a dozen men, not one of whom is professionally concerned with dancing or writing about it. And that is really the kernel of the whole matter. Six distinguished writers of various lands and times, who have normally devoted themselves not only to such related subjects as music and the theatre, but also to philosophical considerations, either scientific or satiric, of nature and society, have turned their minds upon the dance, defending, attacking, analysing or merely recording it. The particular aspects of the subject that have attracted them are characteristic, varied and refreshing to those of us who are accustomed to professional ap-

proaches to dancing; that their opinions verge on heterodoxy here and there only makes them the more stimulating. Three editors thus tempted to forswear themselves should only be praised for yielding!

Happily, one does not have to agree with any of these six gentlemen, and obviously it would be difficult to agree with all of them. If, for example, one can answer Mr. Craig on Noverre and half a dozen other points, his argument nevertheless has its validity. Similarly, whatever the cogency of Mr. Shaw's particular thesis, it is fine to have so unimpeachable a champion for that long-suffering martyr, the male dancer. After enduring the abuse of the implacable Gautier and the other ballerina-worshippers of his time and later, after surviving the almost more disastrous "rehabilitation" by Diaghileff, he had just begun to get his feet on the ground again when the war arose to destroy him in another way.

It is also good to hear a word spoken by some one in a position to know for Rome's only major contribution to the theatre arts, the pantomimus. Decadent it may have been, but at least it was the last faint echo of the antique choric drama, and as a form would still be rich and exquisite in the hands of an inspired choreographer. For the rest, if Mr. Haggin does not attempt to measure the whole of Balanchine's art by a great deal, at least his especial point is keen and provides no room for argument. With Mr. Mayor's estimate of Mei Lan-fang it is as impossible to disagree as with Hudson's estimate of the La Plata birds.

A further break with precedent in this July number is the invitation to a guest to write the foreword, and in that capacity it is a pleasure to be able without reservations in the interest of courtesy to pronounce the issue vivacious, informative, controversial and altogether delightful. It is doubtful if any other six writers on the dance have ever been collected between covers with such an absence of swooning over the beauty of it all.

The sabbatical idea, then, certainly appears to be a valid one. It does any publication good to get its nose out of its prospectus once in a while. Indeed, it might be in the interests of both pleasure and enlightenment to grant sabbatical freedom to every seventh issue. The editors shall be spoken to about it at once.

JOHN MARTIN

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The Dance

by LUCIAN

LYCINUS :

Well, Crato, this is a truly forceful indictment that you have brought, after long preparation, I take it, against dances and the dancer's art itself, and besides against us who like to see that sort of show, accusing us of displaying great interest in something unworthy and effeminate; but now let me tell you how far you have missed the mark and how blind you have been to the fact that you were indicting the greatest of all the good things in life. . .

CRATO :

Who that is a man at all, a life-long friend of letters, moreover, and moderately conversant with philosophy, abandons his interest, Lycinus, in all that is better and his association with the ancients to sit enthralled by the flute, watching a girlish fellow play the wanton with dainty clothing and bawdy songs and imitate love-sick minxes, the most erotic of all antiquity, such as Phaedra and Parthenope and Rhodope, every bit of this, moreover, accompanied by strumming and tootling and tapping of feet? — a ridiculous business in all truth, which does not in the least become a freeborn gentleman of your sort. So for my part, when I learned that you give your time to such spectacles, I was not only ashamed on your account but sorely distressed that you should sit there oblivious of Plato and Chrysippus and Aristotle, getting treated like people who have themselves tickled in the ear with a feather, and that too when there are countless other things to hear and see that are worth while, if one wants them — flute players who accompany cyclic choruses, singers of conventional compositions for the lyre, and in especial, grand tragedy and comedy, the gayest of the gay; all these have been held worthy to figure in competitions.

LYCINUS :

Heavens, Crato, what sharp teeth there are in this dog of yours that you have let loose on us. . . . I am not altered into forgetfulness

of things at home or ignorance of my own concerns, but — if I may speak my mind without any hesitancy — I have come back to you from the theatre with far more wisdom and more insight into life. Or rather, I may well put it just as Homer does: he who has seen this spectacle "Goes on his way diverted and knowing more than aforetime."

CRATO :

May I never reach ripeness of years if I ever endure anything of the kind, as long as my legs are hairy and my beard unplucked! At present I quite pity you; to the dismay of the rest of us, you have become absolutely infatuated.

LYCINUS :

Then you are willing to leave off your abuse, my friend, and hear me say something about dancing and about its good points, showing that it brings not only pleasure but benefit to those who see it; how much culture and instruction it gives; how it imports harmony into the souls of its beholders, exercising them in what is fair to see, entertaining them in what is good to hear, and displaying to them joint beauty of soul and body? That it does all this with the aid of music and rhythm would not be reason to blame, but rather to praise it.

CRATO :

I have little leisure to hear a madman praise his own ailment, but if you want to flood me with nonsense, I am ready to submit to it as a friendly service and lend you my ears, for even without wax I can avoid hearing rubbish. . .

LYCINUS :

Good, Crato. . . You will very soon find out whether what I am going to say will strike you as nonsense. First of all, you appear to me to be quite unaware that this practice of dancing is not novel. . . In fact, the concord of the heavenly spheres, the interlacing of the errant planets with the fixed stars, their rhythmic agreement and timed harmony, are proofs that dance was primordial. . .

Again, it seems to me that when you praise comedy and tragedy, you have forgotten that in each of them there is a special form of dance; that is to say, the tragic is the Em-

meleia and the comic the Cordax, though sometimes a third form, the Sicinnis, is included also. . .

The themes of tragedy and the dance are common to both, and there is no difference between those of the one and those of the other, except that the themes of the dance are more varied and more unhackneyed, and they contain countless vicissitudes. If the dance does not feature in contests, I maintain that it is because the governors of the games thought the thing too important and too grand to be called into competition. . .

At this point I should like to defend the numerous omissions in my account, that I may not create an impression that I lack sense or learning. . .

What qualifications the dancer on his part ought to have, how he should have been trained, what he should have studied, and by what means he should strengthen his work, I shall now set forth for you, to show you that dance is not one of the facile arts that can be plied without pains, but reaches to the very summit of all culture, not only in music but in rhythm and metre, and especially in your own favorite, philosophy, both physics and ethics. To be sure, dance accounts philosophy's inordinate interest in dialectics inappropriate to herself. From rhetoric, however, she has not held aloof, but has her part in that too, inasmuch as she is given to depicting character and emotion, of which the orators are also fond. And she has not kept away from painting and sculpture. . . As for history, the dancer must know everything, and be able to express it well. . .

Since he is imitative and undertakes to present by means of movements all that is being sung, it is essential for him, as for the orators, to cultivate clearness, so that everything which he presents will be intelligible, requiring no interpreter. No, in the words of the Delphic oracle, whosoever beholds dancing must be able "to understand the mute and hear the silent" dancer.

That is just what happened, they say, in the case of Demetrius the Cynic. He too was denouncing the dance just as you do, saying that the dancer was a mere adjunct to the flute and the pipes and the stamping, himself contributing nothing to the presentation but

making absolutely meaningless, idle movements with no sense in them at all; but that people were duped by the accessories of the business — the silk vestments, the beautiful mask, the flute and its quavers, and the sweet voices of the singers, by all of which the dancer's business, itself amounting to nothing at all, was embellished. Thereupon the dancer at that time . . . enjoining silence upon the stampers and flute players, and upon the chorus itself, quite unsupported, danced the amours of Aphrodite and Ares . . . in such wise that Demetrius . . . raised his voice and shouted at the top of his lungs: "I hear the story you are acting, man, I do not just see it; you seem to me to be talking with your very hands. . ."

In that connection I should like to tell you something that was said by a barbarian. Noticing that the dancer had five masks ready — the drama had that number of acts — since he saw but one dancer, he enquired who were to dance and act the other roles, and when he learned that the dancer himself was to dance and act them all, he said: "I did not realize, my friend, that though you have only this one body, you have so many souls."

If what Plato says about the soul is true, the three parts of it are excellently set forth by the dancer — the orgillous part when he exhibits a man in a rage, the covetous part when he enacts lovers, and the reasoning part when he bridles and governs each of the different passions; this last, to be sure, is disseminated through every portion of the dance just as touch is disseminated through the other senses. And in planning for beauty and for symmetry in the figures of the dance, what else does he do but confirm the words of Aristotle, who praised beauty and considered it to be one of the three parts of the chief good? Moreover, I have heard man express an excessively venturesome opinion about the silence of the characters in the dance, to the effect that it was symbolic of a Pythagorean tenet.

Again, some of the other pursuits promise to give pleasure and others profit, but only the dance has both; and indeed the profit in it is far more beneficial for being associated with pleasure. How much more delightful it is to see than young men boxing, astream

with blood, and other young men wrestling in the dust! Why the dance often presents them in a way that is less risky and at the same time more beautiful and pleasurable. As to the energetic movement of the dance, its twists and turns and leaps and back-flung poses, they are really not only pleasurable to the spectators, but highly healthful to the performers themselves. I should call it the most excellent and best balanced of gymnastic exercises, since besides making the body soft, supple and light, and teaching it to be adroit in shifting, it also contributes no little strength. . .

I wish now to depict for you in words what a good dancer should be like in mind and body. To be sure, I have already mentioned most of his mental qualities. I hold, you know, that he should be retentive of memory, gifted, intelligent, keenly inventive, and above all successful in doing the right thing at the right time; besides he should be able to judge poetry, to select the best songs and melodies, and to reject worthless compositions. What I propose to unveil now is his body. . .

To illustrate, I should like to tell you about the cat-calls of a certain populace, that is not slow to mark such points. The people of Antioch, a very talented city which especially honors the dance, keep such an eye upon everything that is done and said that nothing ever escapes a man of them. When a diminutive dancer made his entrance and began to play Hector, they all cried out in a single voice, "Ho there, Astyanax! where is Hector?" On another occasion, when a man who was extremely tall undertook to dance Capaneus and assault the walls of Thebes, "Step over the wall," they said, "you have no need of a ladder." And in the case of the plump and heavy dancer who tried to make great leaps, they said, "We beg you, spare the stage!" On the other hand, to one who was very thin they called out: "Good health to you," as if he were ill. It is not for the joke's sake that I have mentioned these comments, but to let you see that entire people have taken a great interest in the art of dancing, so that they could regulate its good and bad points. . .

Now that I have spoken of the strong points of dancers, let me tell you also of their

defects. Those of the body, to be sure, I have already set forth; those of the mind I think you will be able to note with this explanation. Many of them, through ignorance — for it is impossible that they should all be clever — exhibit dreadful solecisms, so to speak, in their dancing. Some of them make senseless movements that have nothing to do with the harp-string, as the saying goes; for the foot says one thing and the music another. Others suit their movements to the music, but bring in their themes too late or too soon, as in a case which I remember to have seen one time. A dancer who was presenting the birth of Zeus, with Cronus eating his children, went off into presenting the misfortunes of Thyestes because the similarity led him astray. . . But we should not condemn the dance itself, I take it, or find fault with the activity itself on account of such dancers; we should consider them ignorant, as indeed they are, and should praise those who do everything satisfactorily, in accordance with the regulations and rhythm of the art.

In general, the dancer should be perfect in every point, so as to be wholly rhythmical, graceful, symmetrical, consistent, unexceptionable, impeccable, not wanting in any way, blent of the highest qualities, keen in his ideas, profound in his culture, and above all, human in his sentiments. In fact the praise that he gets from the spectators will be consummate when each of those who behold him recognizes his own traits, or rather sees in the dancer as in a mirror his very self, with his customary feelings and actions. Then people cannot contain themselves for pleasure, and with one accord they burst into applause, each seeing the reflection of his own soul and recognizing himself. Really that Delphic monition "Know thyself" realizes itself in them from the spectacle, and when they go away from the theatre they have learned what they should choose and what avoid, and have been taught what they did not know before.

As in literature, so too in dancing what is generally called "bad taste" comes in when they exceed the due limit of mimicry and put forth greater effort than they should; if something large requires to be shown, they represent it as enormous; if something dainty,

they make it extravagantly effeminate, and they carry masculinity to the point of savagery and bestiality. . .

These, my friend, are but a few out of manifold achievements and activities of the dance, and I have given you a glimpse of them in order that you may not be highly displeased with me for viewing them with ardent eyes. If you should care to join me in looking on, I know very well that you will be wholly enthralled and will even catch the dancer-craze. . . Dancing charms the eyes and makes them wide awake, and it rouses the mind to respond to every detail of its performances.

CRATO :

Upon my word, Lycinus, I have come to the point of believing you and am all agog, ear and eye alike. Do remember, my friend, when you go to the theatre, to reserve me a seat at your side, in order that you may not be the only one to come back to us wiser!

Mei Lan-fang

by A. HYATT MAYOR

Before the depression many of us used to go to Chatham Square and later to Grand Street to see the Chinese repertory theatre. Even later, even now, one can still occasionally catch strolling Chinese players as they flit through obscure Bowery theatres. Our early downtown explorations always used to be rewarded by something or other—a singer chanting the passions of some, for us, yet undiscovered springtime or a dancer shuttling deftly through a headdress of ten foot pheasant plumes, and there was always the intelligent use of sound; the voice, trained to the thrilling shrillness of a bird's and slipping so easily from recitative into aria and back again; the deafening cymbals that punctuate the action more clearly than the Elizabethan couplet which marks a shift in scene; the beat of the flutes and fiddles as they drift from something like seven nine time to what might be eleven thirteen. I remember one scene at the old Thalia in Chatham Square in which a lover and his lass plighted their troth by mingling their blood in a goblet. When he,

equipped with wooden knife and solid cup, grasped her hand, she jerked away. He clamped her arm under his armpit, and, as he touched his knife to her finger, a musician flicked some sandpaper — zzzt — then quickly tapped a block — tok tok tok tok — for the dropping blood. The ear of the whole theatre was tucked right into the cup by the neatest acoustical closeup.

The elaborate sign language of the Chinese stage imposes a rigorous schooling on the actor. In order to be understood by the audience, the classic gestures for opening an imaginary door, riding a horse and so forth must be mastered by the Chinese actor as thoroughly as the five positions and the arabesques must be mastered by the Western ballet dancer. As a result of this basic training even the poorest Chinese actor achieves a precision which we in the West take for granted in our ballet, but find among our actors only in the outstanding virtuosi.

But new ranges of clarity and finish were revealed to us when Mei Lan-fang, the great Chinese actor of women's parts, brought his troupe to New York some dozen years ago. Mei, with a voice and body more highly trained than any other actor I have ever seen, could use the imaginative conventions of his tradition to more memorable effect. When he walked, gracefully teetering as if on bound feet, he swayed across the stage like a bodiless undulation. Yet he could on occasion dance with a precision and agility as exhilarating as that of any acrobat in vaudeville. One of the most vivid memories he left in New York was his dance of the warrior maiden. Quietly he took his place in the center of the stage carrying a bright broadsword with which he began his infinite manipulations. The sword became a whirring wafer, like a buzzsaw seen edgeways; it became a figure eight in steel ribbon; became a wide flashing flange. With a smooth click, the sword split into two swords, two electric fans of danger, now side by side, now one above the other, rising, sinking, adjusting their altitude as freely as the propellers of a helicopter. Then suddenly furling his flames, Mei as it were reappeared, slight, cool, elusively smiling.



THE SUSPECTED SLIPPER. Courtesy of the Vandamm Studio and the Museum of the City of New York.

Shakespeare's actors must have been capable of some such acrobatics in the scuffles and battles that are placed after four and a half acts of talk in order to rest the ear and refresh the eye. The actors are rare that can do such stunts today. The only time I remember seeing acrobatics used in Shakespeare — and to great effect — was in Margaret Webster's production of *Henry IV* in which Prince Hal and Hotspur did some admirable tumbling.

With such flexible control over a body of whipcord, Mei could perform remarkable feats in slow motion. In one scene which he played in New York every night, he took the part of a girl who saves her city by stabbing an enemy general. When a sudden danger almost makes her faint with fear, he declined imperceptibly groundwards, his

white silken swathings spreading as deliberately as drifting vapor, until he came to apparent rest just above the floor in an extension as easy as a Tiepolo divinity relaxing on a cloud. It was only later, when trying to analyse the mechanics of this gradual repose, that one realised that he must have taken his ease by balancing on one elbow and one heel.

Mei's acting was without the eccentricity of female impersonation in vaudeville and without the pinched smirk of perversity of the Japanese actors of female roles as portrayed by Sharaku. His detachment, now sympathetic, now amused, cleared his style of realistic detail and gave it the force of some such form as the Greek and Elizabethan actors may have had when they acted as women. Perhaps it was these subtle simplifications that enabled Mei to make his audience feel settings that were not suggested by any scenery. The most vivid projection of a place and hour which he achieved in his New York engagement was in a play about a cruel tax collector who extorts money from a poor fisherman and his daughter. The backdrop was the same embroidered curtain which always hung on his stage and the bare electric bulbs blazed as full and square as they always did. The scene opened with the fisherman and his daughter (Mei) making their entrance in an imaginary skiff. This they did by shuffling in lockstep, Mei behind, around the edges of the red floorcloth of the stage, Mei sculling with a sandalwood paddle inlaid with mother of pearl. Circling into the center of the carpet, they slowed down, backed water, threw out an imaginary anchor, laid imaginary fishlines, and settled themselves to wait. As Mei, gazing horizonwards with chin on palm, grew drowsy, he surrounded the audience with the wide calm of the river slumbering under the moon. The wicked tax collector entered, and from the edge of the carpet peered at Mei and the old man, cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted in a hoarse far voice. No answer. He shouted again, louder. Mei, lifting his heavy expressive eyelids, stared, nudged the old man and the two of them reluctantly hauled in their

lines and slowly, sulkily, shuffled and sculled in a wide arc toward the tax collector. And then the miracle occurred. The tax collector eyed the narrowing gap between him and the two and when he judged them close enough, jumped. Instantly he squatted while Mei rose in the air, then Mei squatted while he rose in the air, and so they rocked back and forth till the skiff steadied itself. I have never seen anything in a theatre that so simply and vividly made me feel the motion of a boat. Surely Shakespeare must have planned some such synchronised hydraulic knee action for the shipwreck that opens the *Tempest*. With so simple and satisfying a convention, painted scenery or a plywood boat would have been worse than superfluous. It would have been a nuisance.

The points at which the Chinese theatre differs from our modern theatre are the points at which it resembles the two greatest theatres of the West, the Greek and the Elizabethan. All three play by daylight or with steady artificial light, use scenery little and parade gorgeous costumes against a fairly constant background, cast men in women's roles, have a stylized language, probably a stylized delivery and a certain amount of stylized action. Since of the three theatres only the Chinese continues as an unbroken tradition today, it is the greater pity that the Chinese theatre, or at least the provincial troops that still visit the Bowery, should be busy discarding their conventions, which are their strength, for our modern "improvements."

The Russian Ballet

by EDWARD GORDON CRAIG

We leave ourselves at home when we go to the theatre; we there renounce the right to our own tongue and choice, to our taste, and even to our courage as we possess it and practise it within our own four walls in relation to God and man. No one takes his finest taste in art into the theatre with him, not even the artist who works for the theatre; there one is people, public, herd, woman, Pharisee, voting animal, democrat, neighbor and fellow creature; there even the most

personal conscience succumbs to the leveling charm of the "great multitude"; there stupidity operates as wantonness and contagion; there the neighbor rules; there one becomes a neighbor.

Nietzsche (*The Joyful Wisdom*).

* * *

In Art there must be created no feeling of disharmony between the Body and the Soul, yet in creating art the body must be obedient, true, faithful to the Soul.

It is the Soul must speak, but the lips must not be seen to move, and the throat must be as ivory. . .

The Russian Ballet is essentially the "Art" which is created by the Body. Its appeal is to our senses, not through them.

Having excited them, it has done its task. It makes no further effort. It is sensuous art and not spiritual, and it is just as far removed from Architecture and Music as the Body is from the Soul, and I wish, and millions of people wish, to see the Theatre give birth to an art, as spiritual as music or architecture.

I wonder if any of you will have read the "Life and Works of Chevalier Noverre." . . . Noverre was a *maitre a danser* — a Ballet master, the most celebrated of the 18th century, and the times and values then were very little different in regard to art from those of today, and people exaggerated the importance of the dashing personality of the charming *maitre* and confounded it with his work, even as they exaggerate and confuse the persons with the work of the modern Ballet masters.

When we discover a dashing personality we conclude that we have discovered a great artist and we speak of him in place of his art: or we are blinded by that personality and take it to *be* his art: for we have taught ourselves some tricky phrase about personality in art and are unable to get free from our conception. . .

Yet Noverre will live by those of his works which have come down to us, and they show us pretty clearly that he was not an artist . . . that he was a charlatan in so far as art is concerned; and they should warn us to be a little careful before we explode with too much

enthusiasm about the nearest things to Noverre's "art" which we can witness now, the Russian Ballet.

I am a great admirer of the Russian Ballet. I find that it is often the best dressed company of ladies and gentlemen who ever assumed a little sock and less buskin.

When I say that I am an admirer of the Russian Ballet, I mean that all the dancers and their *maitre a danser* charm me in spite of a few things that I frankly don't like. . . I have reason for being opposed to the entrance of the studio painter into the Theatre; just as many of you would dislike to see a stage painter decorating your churches. The Theatre has its own great scene-painters and needs no others.

I am not a believer in the fluttering, bubbling personality of the stage "Stars"; I am against the emphasis which is laid on the Body in the Theatre, because I am one of those few who love the Stage as a father loves his son, as a son his father.



The dancers of the Russian Ballet and their *maitre a danser* are charming people . . . but if you ask me to look upon their work as a work of art, or to speak of them as great artists, I must refuse, and I hope that some of the visitors to Covent Garden will be with me here.

Noverre once entered the lists against Aeschylus and attempted to interpret anew the story of Agamemnon and Orestes. Noverre was a great *maitre a danser*, but he was no artist.

Here is his conception of the mighty works of the trilogy:

AGAMEMNON REVENGED

A tragic Ballet

by

Jean Georges Noverre

Scene I — Part of the Gardens of Mycene

Egysthus and Clytemnestra enter, felicitating each on their mutual happiness, and anxious only for the pleasing moment when they shall make public the sentiments which unite their hearts. The distance and uncertainty, however, of that desired period fill Clytemnestra with the most distressing disquietude (notice how this tragic ballet opens in anxious jerks and distressing spasms, the very opposite way to that in which one expects a tragedy to begin) which is heightened by the alarming presages of a very frightful dream. Egysthus, not less troubled on this account than the queen, throws himself at her feet, and swearing love and everlasting fidelity, promises that his arm shall soon deliver her from the obstacles that seem to threaten an interruption to their mutual bliss. . .

This is poor Noverre's idea of Tragedy and of Art. . .

A splendid line or two in a badly conceived and badly written poem will not make a work of art, and there is something seriously wrong with us if our critical faculty is able to be carried away to such an extent that we apply the same terms of praise to the ballets of Noverre or Fokine as we do to the solemn and lovely works of art by Aeschylus or John Sebastian Bach. . .

Art is not at all a matter of accident: it is all a matter of design even as nature is a matter of design. And so deliberate a misreading of Nature as Noverre is guilty of, is exactly what the Russian Ballet is guilty of.

M. Nijinsky's *Après-midi d'un Faune* does not improve matters. Thought out with the all-too-clever twists of the Russian brains, it is daring and nothing else. I am told that M. Rodin was enthusiastic. What of that? Shall a sculptor decide all things? If this be allowed will it also be permitted that we of the Theatre shall be the judges to pronounce of Sculpture . . . and be listened to? Take care lest we pronounce in favor of our property man who makes our Giant's head or Blondin donkeys!

Nature is not all like a charming Carnival, or that ridiculous interpretation of Chopin in muslin skirts . . . where the dancers could not even interpret correctly.

For Nature has a Rhythm. The Russian Ballet knows nothing of that Rhythm. It is charming—perfectly, deliciously charming but its charm is artificial; and Art's great claim to distinction is that it approaches nearer to Nature than anything else can do. And we insult all the masters of old, and those who today are striving to learn a few of the myriad secrets of Nature, when we rave frantically over what the Russian Ballet has to offer us. . .

I wish our Russian visitors all the "success" in the world . . . may they come back to England again and again, and may a rain of bouquets be showered upon the lovely ladies who pass before us so tenderly and so temptingly on the stage of Covent Garden. May Nijinsky leap as loftily as ever and even more lightly, and may our admiration for his surprising technical powers still express themselves in thunders of applause.

As for M. Fokine, let him be crowned King of all the Ballets!

But let us not act towards Art as foolish traitors do who sell the noblest for the silver pieces. We can all of us fall under the spell of these dancers for the moment, but let us not love and reverence them as though they had reached to the high achievement of masters of art.

The Theatre is in this century about to make a new effort to become a fine art . . . it is preparing to ascend . . . to approach a very difficult and dangerous incline. Do not thoughtlessly hamper its ascent by ill-advised

enthusiasm whenever it stumbles in the ascent.

The Russian Ballet is held to be the finest achievement of the New Theatre. The Russian Ballet belongs to the Theatre of Yesterday.

When our Theatre is re-formed my knowledge of my theatrical brothers forces me to be quite certain that we shall "reform it altogether."

Balanchine:

Musician-Choreographer

by B. H. HAGGIN

It is the eye, first—even an unprofessional eye like mine—that is impressed, fascinated, delighted by those strokes of imagination and wit that somebody once felicitously named *fantaisie Balanchine*. I mean such things, in *The Prodigal Son*,* as the four-footed, vermin-like scurrings of the squatting-back-to-back companions of the prodigal after they have despoiled him; the returned son prostrate on the ground embracing his father's legs and pulling himself up into the arms and cloak that receive and enfold him. Or in *Cotillon*, at the end of the Magic Lantern episode, the young girl coming up to the end of the double column that stands motionless, and dispersing it with movements of her arms that part one pair of girls after another to send them flying off in opposite directions; the bits of delightful fooling in the earlier Introductions—the girls coquettishly fanning themselves seated on stiff little chairs on which they are gallantly rocked by the men, the mistress-of-ceremonies hovered over attentively by a group of men as she reclines languorously on three or four of the chairs placed together.

One notes the strokes of this kind in which the traditional ballet movements are imaginatively used and transformed, as elements integrated into Balanchine's personal vocabulary; one notes the use of this vocabulary in

* I refer to the 1929 production by Diaghilev, not to the recent production by De Basil with new choreography by Lichine.

NOTE: Miss Muriel Stuart helped formulate the technical description of choreographic details.

the imaginative transformations of traditional ballet situations — e.g. in the ever newly and excitingly imagined thing which Balanchine makes in each ballet of the traditional *pas de deux* of ballerina and male partner. In *The Prodigal Son* it is the seduction, ending in the interlocking of the two bodies; in *Cotillon* it is the most wonderful of all his *pas de deux*, the series of stylized movements that convey the strangeness, the ominousness of the Hand of Fate episode, in which, for example, the man retreats before the woman in black whose every advancing rise on one point in an *arabesque* is a menace, or later the man, kneeling, his raised hands grasped by the woman's, is held and enveloped by her series of *ronds de jambes* around and over him.

In time even an unprofessional eye may take in not only details but the sustained invention, employing a distinctive vocabulary and style, in which one of the great creative minds of our period is artistically articulate. And in time also that eye may have the assistance of the ear. Chabrier's music had been fascinating in itself; now one recognizes its relation to Balanchine's choreography — the relation of the strangeness of the Hand of Fate *pas de deux* to the strangeness of *Idylle* of the "Dix Pièces pittoresques":



of the affecting details of the Magic Lantern episode to some of the affecting phrases of the third "Valse romantique." One discovers, in short, how much Balanchine's choreographic invention is bound up with feeling for music — with, in fact, sharp musical perception: the choreography of the Magic Lantern episode shows an understanding of the quality of the music that is not conveyed by the perfunctory rattling-off which the piece gets from Robert and Gaby Casadesus on the Columbia record.

Concerning Balanchine's musicianship as it operates in his choreographic invention Lincoln Kirstein has observed correctly that it is "essentially, not literally poetic" — that the movements, in other words, are not a mere visualization of the patterns of the sound. Elaborating on this he has contended that Balanchine "would never have been so naive as to reiterate the individual air-turms of the opening of the fourth movement of Massine's *Choréartium*, where a brave attempt is made to connect the dance-steps with the initial ascendant chords of Brahms, [but] only up to the place where the symphonic structure becomes too complex for a choreographer to follow literally." Instead he exhibits "an extraordinary gift for finding the quality of coherent gesture to fit the exact shade of quality in the chosen music. . . The gestures have a quality of independent rightness exhausting the motor impulses in the music and in the lyrical sub-structure of concepts on which the music is founded."

The positive statement is true; the negative one too strong. It is true that at the beginning of the second movement of *Ballet Impériale* to Tchaikovsky's G major Piano Concerto it is only the tension built up and released in the phrase of music:



that is found in the corresponding phrase of movement, in which the man, in the center of a line of girls, uses his body as a pivot on which he swings the line on his right, first around behind him, and then back to its original position. And in the first movement it is only the rhapsodic, quasi-improvisatory style of the solo piano's cadenza that is in the corresponding solo of the ballerina. But there are bound to be instances where the movements that fit the music's quality and exhaust its motor impulses show correspondence with the pattern of the sounds in which the quality is realized and the motor impulses are ex-

hausted in the music itself. Thus, in the Spanish episode of *Cotillon*, the quality of the phrase of Chabrier's Scherzo-Valse:



and the tension that is built up in the first four measures and then released in the last two, are reproduced in the girl's pert rise on the points on the first beat of each of the first four measures, and her *pirouette* in the last two.

We get, then, on the one hand, that exquisite dispersal of the double column of girls at the end of the Magic Lantern episode in *Cotillon*, which has a relation only to the quality of the music:



and on the other hand, just before the dispersal, the girls' series of accentuated thrusts and swings of the arm, corresponding to the series of arpeggiated chords:



Or, in the first movement of *Concerto Barocco* to Bach's D minor Concerto for two violins, we get the literal—in fact the too literal—dancing of the contrapuntal comment in the bass:



and in the second movement, on the other hand, the points of increasing, then released phraseological and emotional tension that are the same in the unpausing flow of lovely melody and in the parallel flow of movement, which is one of the most beautiful things ever created on a stage.

Music and Dancing in Nature

by W. H. HUDSON

In reading books of Natural History we meet with numerous instances of birds possessing the habit of assembling together, in many cases always at the same spot, to indulge in antics and dancing performances, with or without the accompaniment of music, vocal or instrumental; and by instrumental music is here meant all sounds other than those made habitually and during the more or less orderly performances; as, for instance, drumming and tapping noises; smiting of wings; and humming, whip-cracking, fan-shutting, grinding, scraping, and horn-blowing sounds, produced as a rule by the quills.

There are human dances, in which only one person performs at a time, the rest of the company looking on; and some birds, in widely separated genera, have dances of this kind. A striking example is the Rupicola, or cock-of-the-rock, of tropical South America. A mossy level spot of earth surrounded by bushes is selected for a dancing-place, and kept well cleared of sticks and stones; round this area the birds assembled, when a cock-bird, with a vivid crest and plumage, steps into it, and, with spreading wings and tail, begins a series of movements as if dancing a minuet; finally, carried away with excitement, he leaps and gyrates in the most astonishing manner, until, becoming exhausted, he retires, and another bird takes his place.

* * *

Those who seek to know the cause and origin of this kind of display and of song in animals are referred to Darwin's *Descent of Man* for an explanation. The greater part of that work is occupied with a laborious argument intended to prove that the lovefeeling inspires the animals engaged in these exhibitions, and that sexual selection, or the voluntary selection of mates by females, is the final cause of all set musical and dancing performances, as well as of bright and harmonious coloring, and of ornaments.

The theory, with regard to birds, is that in the love-season, when the males are excited and engage in courtship, the females do not fall to the strongest and most active, nor to those that are first in the field; but that in a large number of species they are endowed with a faculty corresponding to the aesthetic feeling or taste in man, and deliberately select males for their superiority in some aesthetic quality, such as graceful or fantastic motions, melody of voice, brilliancy of colour, or perfection of ornaments.

* * *

The rails, active, sprightly birds with powerful and varied voices, are great performers; but owing to the nature of the ground they inhabit and to their shy, suspicious character, it is not easy to observe their antics. The finest of the Platan rails is the ypecaha, a beautiful, active bird about the size of the fowl. A number of ypecahas have their assembling place on a small area of smooth, level ground, just above the water, and hemmed in by dense rush beds. First, one bird among the rushes emits a powerful cry, thrice repeated; and this is a note of invitation, quickly responded to by other birds from all sides as they hurriedly repair to the usual place. In a few moments they appear, to the number of a dozen or twenty, bursting from the rushes and running into the open space, and instantly beginning the performance. This is a tremendous screaming concert. The screams they utter have a certain resemblance to the human voice, exerted to its utmost pitch and expressive of extreme terror, frenzy, and despair. A long piercing shriek, astonishing for its vehemence and power, is succeeded by a lower note, as if in the first the creature had well nigh exhausted itself: this double scream is repeated several times, and followed by other sounds, resembling, as they rise and fall, half smothered cries of pain and moans of anguish. Suddenly the unearthly shrieks are renewed in all their power. While screaming the birds rush from side to side, as if possessed with madness, the wings spread and vibrating, the long beak

wide open and raised vertically. This exhibition lasts three or four minutes, after which the assembly peacefully breaks up.

The singular wattled, wing-spurred, and long-toed jacana has a remarkable performance, which seems specially designed to bring out the concealed beauty of the silky, greenish-golden wing-quills. The birds go singly or in pairs, and a dozen or fifteen individuals may be found in a marshy place feeding within sight of each other. Occasionally, in response to a note of invitation, they all in a moment leave off feeding and fly to one spot, and, forming a close cluster, and emitting short, excited notes, display their wings, like beautiful flags grouped loosely together: some hold the wings up vertically and motionless; others, half open and vibrating rapidly, while still others wave them up and down with a slow, measured motion.

In the ypecaha and jacana displays both sexes take part. A stranger performance is that of the spur-winged lapwing of the same region—a species resembling the lapwing of Europe, but a third larger, brighter and coloured, and armed with spurs. The lapwing display, called by the natives its “dance” or “serious dance”—by which they mean square dance—requires three birds for its performance, and is, so far as I know, unique in this respect. The birds are so fond of it that they indulge in it all year round, and at frequent intervals during the day, also on moonlight nights. If a person watches any two birds for some time—for they live in pairs—he will see another lapwing, one of a neighboring couple, rise up and fly to them, leaving his own mate to guard their chosen ground; instead of resenting this visit as an unwarranted intrusion on their domain, as they would certainly resent the approach of almost any other bird, they welcome it with notes and sighs of pleasure. Advancing to the visitor, they place themselves behind it; then all three, keeping step, begin a rapid march, uttering resonant drumming notes in time with their movements; the notes of the pair behind being emitted in a stream, like a drum-roll, while the leader utters loud single notes at regular intervals. The march ceases; the leader elevates his wings and stands erect and

motionless, still uttering loud notes; while the other two, with puffed-out plumage and standing exactly abreast, stoop forward and downward until the tips of their beaks touch the ground, and, sinking their rhythmical voices to a murmur, remain for some time in this posture. The performance is then over and the visitor goes back to his own ground and mate, to receive a visitor himself later on.

* * *

The explanation I have to offer lies very much on the surface and is very simple indeed, and, like that of Dr. Wallace with regard to colour and ornaments, covers the whole of the facts. We see that the inferior animals, when the conditions of life are favourable, are subject to periodical fits of gladness, affecting them powerfully and standing out in vivid contrast to their ordinary temper. And we know what this feeling is — this periodic intense elation which even civilized man occasionally experiences when in perfect health, more especially when young. There are moments when he is mad with joy, when he cannot keep still, when his impulse is to sing and shout aloud and laugh at nothing, to run and leap and exert himself in some extravagant way. Among the heavier mammals the feeling is manifested in loud noises, bellowings and screamings, and in lumbering, uncouth motions — throwing up of heels, pretended panics, and ponderous mock battles.

* * *

Birds are more subject to this universal joyous instinct than mammals, and there are times when some species are constantly overflowing with it; and as they are so much freer than mammals, more bouyant and graceful in action, more loquacious, and voices so much finer, their gladness shows itself in a greater variety of ways, with more regular and beautiful motions, and with melody. But every species, or group of species, has its own inherited form or style of performance; and, however rude and irregular this may be, as in the case of the pretended stampedes and fights of wild cattle, that is the form in which the feeling will always be expressed. If all



Spur-winged Lapwings

men, at some exceedingly remote period in our history, had agreed to express the common glad impulse, which they now express in such an infinite variety of ways or do not express at all, by dancing a minuet, and minuet-dancing had at last come to be instinctive, and taken to spontaneously by children at an early period, just as they take to walking "on their hind legs," man's case would be like that of the inferior animals.

I was one day watching a flock of plovers, quietly feeding on the ground, when, in a moment, all the birds were seized by a joyous madness, and each one, after making a vigorous peck at his nearest neighbour, began running wildly about, each trying in passing to peck other birds, while seeking by means of quick doublings to escape being pecked in turn. This species always expresses its glad impulse in the same way; but how different in form is this simple game of touch-who-touch-can from the triplet dances of the spur-winged lapwings, with their drumming music, pompous gestures, and military precision of movement! How different also from the aerial performance of another bird of the same family — the Brazilian stilt — in which one is pursued by the others, mounting upwards

in a wild, eccentric flight until they are all but lost to view; and back to earth again, and skywards once more; the pursued bird when overtaken giving place to another individual, and the pursuing pack making the air ring with their melodious barking cries! How different again are all these from the aerial pastimes of the snipe, in which the bird, in its violent descent, is able to produce such wonderful, far-reaching sounds with its tail-feathers! The snipe, as a rule, is a solitary bird, and . . . is content to practise its pastimes without a witness. In the gregarious kinds all perform together: for this feeling, like fear is eminently contagious, and the sight of one bird mad with joy will quickly make the whole flock mad.

* * *

It is, no doubt, true that all collections of facts relating to animal life present nature to

us somewhat as a "fantastic realm" — unavoidably so, in a measure, since the writing would be too bulky, or too dry, or too something inconvenient, if we did not take only the most important facts that come before us, remove them from their places, where alone they can be seen in their proper relations to numerous other less prominent facts, and rearrange them patchwork-wise to make up our literature. But I am convinced that any student of the subject who will cast aside his books — supposing that they have not already bred a habit in his mind of seeing only "in accordance with verbal statement" — and go directly to nature to note the actions of animals for himself — actions which, in many cases, appear to lose all significance when set down in writing — the result of such independent investigation will be a conviction that conscious sexual selection on the part of the female is not the cause of music and dancing performances in birds.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Some 450 years before Hudson, another keen observer of animals, Antonio Pisanello, painted a round Nativity, now in Berlin, with a *pas de deux* danced by a male and female stork in mid air.

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